

# Alan Watts Memos

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# THE ART OF CONTEMPLATION



*A Facsimile Manuscript with Doodles by*

# ALAN WATTS



## THE ART OF CONTEMPLATION.

**T**HE INDIVIDUAL is an aperture through which the whole energy of the universe is aware of itself, a vortex of vibrations in which it realizes itself as man or beast, flower or star—not alone, but as central to all that surrounds it. These centers are not, as may seem, apart from their surroundings, but stand in mutual relationship to them—center to circumference—in the same way as the magnetic poles. It is thus that each center anywhere implies all other centers elsewhere. The individual is not, therefore, only a center. He is the entire surround centered at this time or his place, which is why the astrologers try to infer the character of an individual from the disposition of the universe encircling him, though it is doubtful whether they know how to read it correctly.

The whole system is symbiotic in principle, for no individual can exist, for however short a time, except in mutual interdependence with the whole. For it could be said, in the rather clumsy language of nouns and verbs which arbitrarily distinguishes things from events, that the individual is something which the whole is doing, and that the whole is something which the individual is doing simultaneously. This relationship is not ordinarily felt or recognized in human consciousness, limited as it is by the apparent independence of the individual from the whole—and also frightened by it. The individual feels restricted in the area of his voluntary behavior, since all else seems to be independent and uncontrollable happening on the part of something quite





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To understand the reciprocity or mutual interdependence of polar opposites—being and nothing, center and surround, self and other, doing and happening—might be called polar vision. I have been speaking of it in the dry terms of logic, in which it may be grasped intellectually. But when polar vision comes in the form of immediate sensation and feeling it is known as mystical experience or cosmic consciousness, and of this it is better to speak in the mode of poetry and paradox. Thus to feel polar vision is to feel that what happens to you is your own doing, and that your own doing is happening to you; that death and emptiness is the firm ground upon which life walks; and that oneself as both center and surround is the eternal universe. But this feeling, or intuition, does not come in the form of words or ideas, and does not depend on any trick of imagination or self-suggestion. It is more as when one simply sees blue sky or feels that one is alive.

This feeling or, rather, the basis for it, is always present. We are unaware of it only because our consciousness is distracted by another and incompatible feeling of identity which almost all thinking peoples learn from childhood. All too easily, we confuse symbols and signs with what they represent, as in saying, "this is a tree," when that to which we are pointing is quite other than the sound "tree." At a much deeper level we confuse what we actually are, as center and surround or organism-and-environment, with an idea, concept, or image of ourselves from which the interdependence of self and other is absent. This image we call the "I," the ego, the person, or the subject (as distinct from the object.) We consider it as the doer of our deeds, the thinker of our thoughts, and the feeler of our feelings.



It is a false image for three reasons.

The first is that it is only a concept or symbol, and thus can no more do anything than the word "water" can quench thirst. The second is that it is no more than an impoverished caricature of our whole organism, since there is nothing in it which corresponds to the subconscious processes of our being. The third is that it entirely leaves out the polar unity of the organism with the universe, ignoring the fact that the two are a single process.

Under the impression that this pure abstraction is the vital core and organizing center of our being, we try to exert its "will" when action is difficult or emotions hard to restrain. Thus in "taking a hard look" at something, or listening intently, we tighten muscles in the regions of the eyes and ears. We scratch our heads when we are puzzled, and frown when we are trying to pay close attention. We grit our teeth when trying to endure pain, clench our fists when trying to "hold on to ourselves," and tighten our stomach muscles when attempting to restrain anxiety. All these actions are futile, and do nothing to attain the desired objectives. But they are chronic and habitual, and build up a generalized state of bodily tension, often centered just above and between the eyes, which serves as the referent, the felt experience, corresponding to the symbol-image of the person or ego—thus marrying an illusion to a futility.

The question—what, then, can be done to overcome this false sense of identity and to replace it with polar vision and cosmic consciousness—is impossible to answer in its own terms. All that needs to be experienced for cosmic consciousness is already



present, and anything in excess of this would be obstructive & redundant — like red ink on a rose. Otherwise, it is simply necessary to see that our usual "I" is a false and impotent image. But just as this phantom cannot actually will or do anything, it cannot get rid of itself. No tasing of muscles or, for that matter, deliberate relaxing of muscles, no repetitions of formulae, no self-suggestion, no exercises of imagination, no psychophysical regimens of any kind will do anything but add strength to the phantom. For every littlest movement — to change, or to try not to change, the way you actually feel now will be just one more of those futile muscular tensions (like trying to lift an airliner off the ground by straining at your seat-belt) which give semblance to the reality of the separated ego. You, considered as that ego, cannot get polar vision or cosmic consciousness. It might arise all of itself, as if by divine grace, but there is nothing, just nothing, you can do or not do to bring it about. Yogis and Zen followers sometimes come to this point after long and heroic efforts.

At this point there is nothing to do except what is happening of itself. All that remains is the simple awareness of what is going on — trees outside, street sounds, clock ticking, sunlight on carpet, breathing, body feelings, talking to yourself in your head. Usual cosmic jazz. That's what there is, and every bit of it, including memories and recollections, is happening now. It comes out of nothing as sounds come out of silence, for it should be obvious that the universe has always started from now and left traces behind, like a pen as it writes, though the written record, the seeming past, is still and only now.



You, as ego, cannot change what you are feeling, and you cannot, effectively, try not to change it. There is simply and only what is happening, including those particular thoughts, images, and tensions which you customarily attributed to the phantom thinker and doer. They persist like echoes, but as it is seen that they are just static in the nervous system and not the work of any central ego, they lose interest, subside, and go away of themselves. Hoping that they will go away is just more static.

If you have understood all this, you are simply aware of what is happening now, and we might call this state meditation or, better, contemplation. But it is not that you are something which is just watching what happens. "What happens" is just using your organism to watch itself. It is the universe centering as a particular being, though it is not necessary to use or insist on this concept, for what is important here is not the idea but the feeling of it. The words are only a special use of noises in the air, marks on paper, or vibrations in the brain.

If this becomes clear, the effort to transform one's own mind should collapse, and along with it the whole illusion that one is a separate center of consciousness to which experience happens and for which these happenings are problematic. This collapse would then become the state of contemplation, the realization that all is One. I may understand this point theoretically, but still there seems to be no change, for which reason I look for some process whereby I can move from theoretical to immediate or intuitive understanding—not recognizing that this is still a subtle form of the







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absurd attempt to transform the transformer, arising from the illusory distinction of thinker and thought, experiencer and experience.

So long as this subtle confusion remains, one can be beguiled into various ways of trying to meditate, and a competent guru will suggest techniques so clever that their absurdity will be difficult to discover without resolute attempts to follow them through. Furthermore, the aspirations and minor successes of other seekers will compound a collective illusion, and even a mutual one-upmanship contest, of believing that this or that method or guru is, at last, the one that really works. Yet the intention of the guru himself is simply to exhaust the energy of the illusion by bringing his disciples again and again to experiences of the absurdity of trying to transform mind with mind. As the Zen patriarch Seng-ts'an put it:

The wise person does not strive;

The ignorant man ties himself up. . . .

If you work on your mind with your mind,

How can you avoid an immense confusion?

But once it has been explained, you may naturally ask whether it is really necessary to go through all this rigorous folly to dissipate the illusion. You will wonder whether knowing, theoretically, in advance that these disciplines are absurd, you will no longer have the motivation to follow them through. Yet shouldn't it be clear that the very question "is it necessary in order to dissipate?" arises directly from the illusion itself? If it isn't clear, you will have the itch to go through the discipline, and try to "get" some attainment and rise to some higher rank of spiritual superiority. But if it is clear

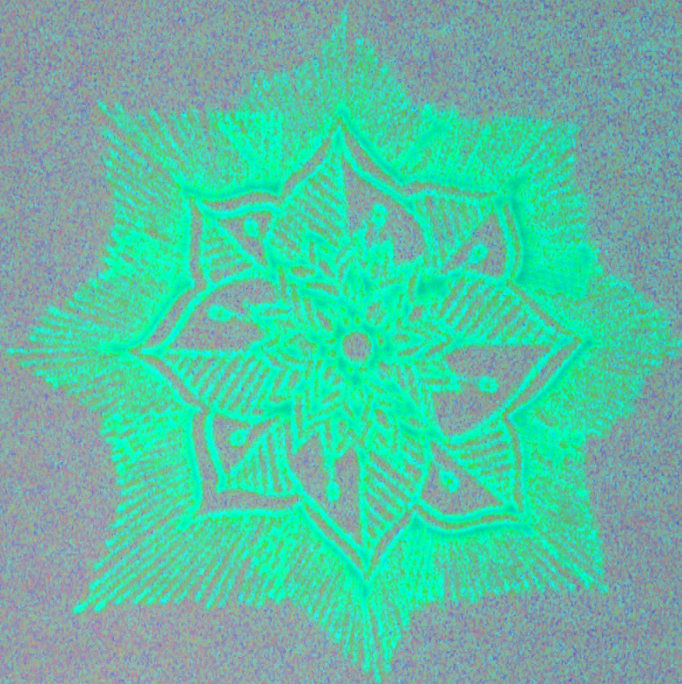


You may feel completely non-plussed and confounded, as if — as the  
 say in Zen — you were a mosquito trying to bite an iron ball.  
 However, this feeling is precisely the sensation that there is no  
 separate self which can either do or not do anything about the  
 problem. Thus it may appear, further, that if there is no distinct  
 ego to be non-plussed, the stream of experience can simply flow  
 on unobstructedly by itself. Hence the verse:

Blue mountains are of themselves blue mountains;  
 White clouds are of themselves white clouds.

This unobstructed flow is the Tao, the way or course of nature  
 and is also what is meant by the state of non-attachment — a  
 spontaneous unforced and unblocked flowing of life. Yet the pros-  
 pect of such flowing as a way of life gives us intense moral  
 anxiety, for at once there are qualms about unleashing the tigers  
 and demons within us if no control is exercised. But such qualms  
 are, again, symptoms of the same old illusion. What if there  
 has been no controlling self all along? Consider, too, whether the  
 human condition could be much more depraved than it is already,  
 and mark the horrendous behavior of people who believe in will-  
 power and in control over their minds and their circumstances. . . .  
 Hitler was an ascetic; Rasputin had incredible mastery of his  
 mind and body; and many of the samurai exploited Zen training  
 for the improvement of military skills, though there were a few,  
 like Miyamoto Musashi, who finally realized the futility of the  
 enterprise. The Tao flows without obstruction whether we know it  
 or not, for the not knowing is no more than a variant pattern of the







As a rule, the mystics and gurus who are no longer seeking any attainment go on with what appear to be the formal practices of meditation. The various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are usually depicted in the position of meditating in the padmasana or lotus-posture like any novice, but this is actually a ritual which is done for its own sake - as one might play the flute, or dance, or invite friends to a formal dinner. It is almost ridiculous to ask, "why meditate?" as if it were going out of one's way to do something bizarre, like lying on a bed of nails. Why look at the stars or watch clouds? Why go sailing to no fixed destination? Nothing is really explained by its cause or motivation, for we find only causes behind causes until we can pursue them no longer. It is like a child asking "Why? why? why? . . ." until its father, like a Zen master says, "O shut up and suck your lollipop!"

Thus contemplation as a particular "exercise," done in a formal way, is simply the ritual enjoyment of that basic awareness of what is happening now which goes on always from moment to moment. In the same way, dancing as dancing is the ritual form of dancing while cooking, or dancing with the pen while writing. It is therefore quite against the spirit of such contemplation to undertake it in a mood of grim seriousness as is sometimes the way in monasteries and religious communities which are really schools for adolescents without true vocation - the contemplative life, where young people are drilled in ritual like conscripted soldiers. Children must under no circumstance



be forced to participate in such exercises, just as we would not dream of requiring them to engage in sexual intercourse. In such ritual it is equally absurd to treat ourselves as children, and to browbeat ourselves into arduous practice with the thought that it will be good for us. The good of contemplation is contemplation — not some future result that it may bring.

While there are traditional forms of the contemplative ritual, there are no fixed ways in which it must be done. It has, however, been found appropriate to sit like a Buddha with the legs crossed, or in lotus-posture, with the back easily erect and the breath coming and going on its own — as if it were falling out and falling in, not as being pushed out or pulled in.

In the same spirit, one does not listen — but simply hears all sounds that are emerging from silence without making any effort to place or identify them. Similarly, one does not look, but only sees light, color, and form playing with the eyes as they, too, emerge moment by moment from the void. Thoughts, likewise, are treated in the same way as sounds, and, if they arise, are merely watched without comment as they come and go, "hearing" them in the same way as one would hear the chattering of birds on the roof.

When the breath subsides into a slow rhythm, it is a special delight to let the voice float a tone upon it, with the sound OM, or the mantram OM AH HUM, and to hear the tone reverberating — perhaps to the accompaniment of a gong which is allowed to hum until its sound fades into all other



sounds. There are many suitable forms of such chanting ritual, employing not only, prolonged single tones, but also rhythmic phrases repeated again and again, as for instance the familiar litting mantram HARI KRISHNA, HARI KRISHNA, KRISHNA KRISHNA, HARI HARI; HARI RAMA, HARI RAMA, RAMA RAMA, HARI HARI. What is important here is not the meaning of the words but their actual sound and the movement of the breath and lips, giving direct experience of the basic energy of life as it comes from the Void.

It is possible that in the course of contemplation there may arise visions or ecstatic states of consciousness, and it is a natural temptation to think of these as the goals of contemplation. However, to attempt to prolong these states, or to regain them when they subside, is like straining the facial muscles to see clearly, and is an effort to interrupt the natural flow of what is happening now. There may also arise a curious sensitivity to the unspoken thoughts and intentions of others, or astonishing dexterity of intellect or fidelity of memory, but these are not to be taken as signs of "progress" in contemplation, because contemplation ceases as soon as there is any seeking for results. Such temptations as these beset ritual contemplation in the same way as playing a musical instrument may be used for ends extraneous to the enjoyment of music, as in competing with oneself or with others for musical status.

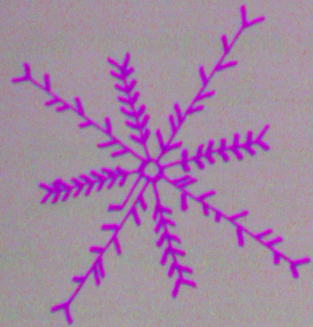
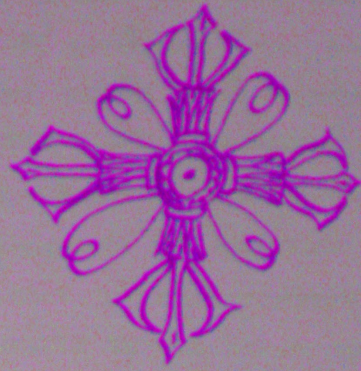
Too much concern for ritual contemplation may also lead to a one-sidedly passive form of life and to the impression



falling away from the eternal now while engaged in other and more strenuous activities. Now the habitual use of muscular tension as the referent for the ego in looking, listening, and willing carries over into the use of natural physical exertion in running, lifting, and hauling so as to make such actions seem entirely different from those which happen "of themselves," spontaneously. Curiously, this sets up, say, in the effort to run, a redundant effort to make the effort, giving the impression that the exertion of running is a direct demonstration of the activity and potency of the ego-image. We have learned, mostly as children, to put on an act of strenuousness while doing strenuous things. Yet efforts to make efforts, being redundant, work against the natural use of muscular energy in such a way that they are self-imposed obstacles, or efforts against effort. It is as if, in pulling, the triceps were to work against the biceps. When this redundant use of effort falls away, it becomes obvious that decisions to do this or that, and the consequent physical actions, happen of themselves like everything else.

For free action is certainly not caused by a purely abstract "I." It emerges from the total intelligence of the organism, in the same way as the growth of the brain and the digestion of food, and it will employ conscious reasoning in situations where reasoning is an appropriate tool. This would perhaps be called biologically or physically "determined" action by those who separate the organism from the rest of the universe, and see it "obeying" or "responding" to "drives" which have first been defined as external to itself.



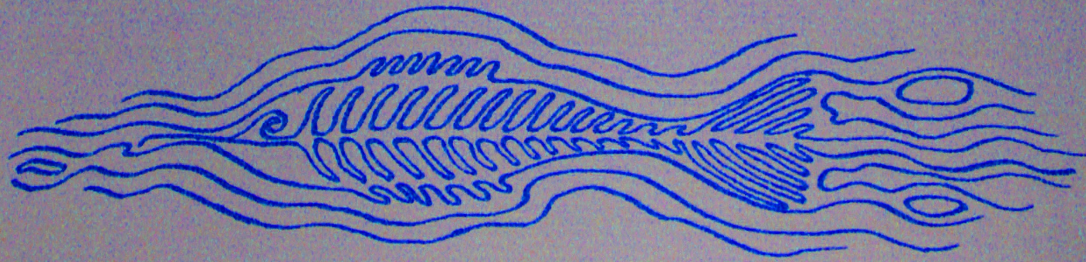




But the individual-and-universe has no external or extraneous determinant. The individual may be seen as constrained by natural processes only when viewed out of context as something in but not of its whole environment. Laws and artificial restraints become necessary when, through the illusion of separateness, the individual loses touch with his organic intelligence and feels at odds with his environment. Obviously, the operation of organic intelligence is not to be confused with the false spontaneity of actions deliberately calculated to be at variance with natural order or human law. Social conventions still govern those who go out of their way to oppose them.

In past times all matters concerning the practice of contemplation were considered esoteric or, what amounts in the West to the same thing, heretical—though not every heresy was of this order, and the contemplative way became heresy only as people tried to describe its content. For, speaking in religious language, it would be plain to the contemplative that only God exists, and that there is nothing other than God. For obvious reasons this is a doctrine greatly feared by both ecclesiastical and secular rulers. On the one hand, when it is necessary that the people be exploited and oppressed, it is important to imbue them with a servile mentality. On the other hand, when people are vulgar and greedy, the mere idea that "is God" or that good and evil are polar is used to justify every wanton excess. It is for this reason that governments forbid the ingestion of hemp-flax and other psychedelic substances, lest immature and half-civilized individ-





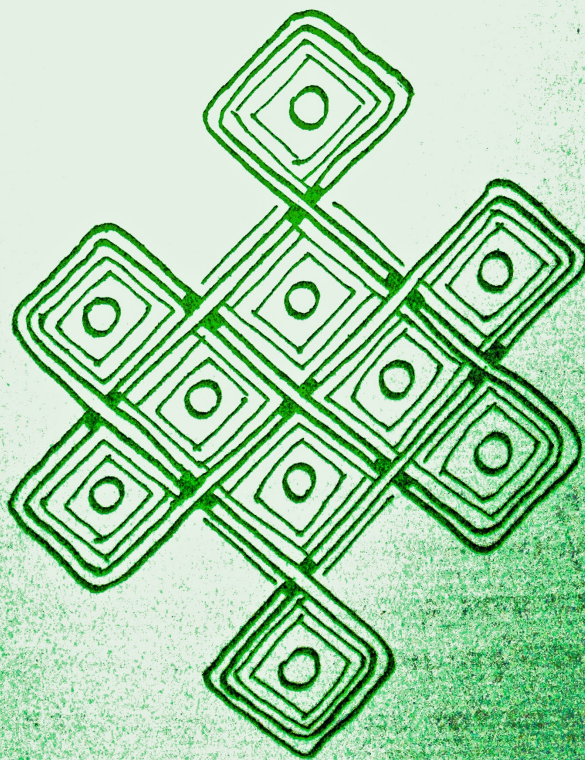
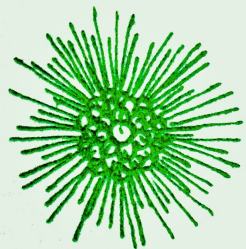


or it is not simply that we are subordinate parts of the system, but that the entire system is ourselves in its full and only true sense. Ordinarily, we may glimpse this truth in a shallowly intellectual way, and consider it as a lofty idea that has little relation to practical affairs and basic emotions. But in contemplation this view is as real and self-evident as breathing, and enables the problems of mundane life to be seen in their true perspective — Sub specie eternitatis — balancing and correcting the usual myopia of exclusive preoccupation with nasty little games and schemes.

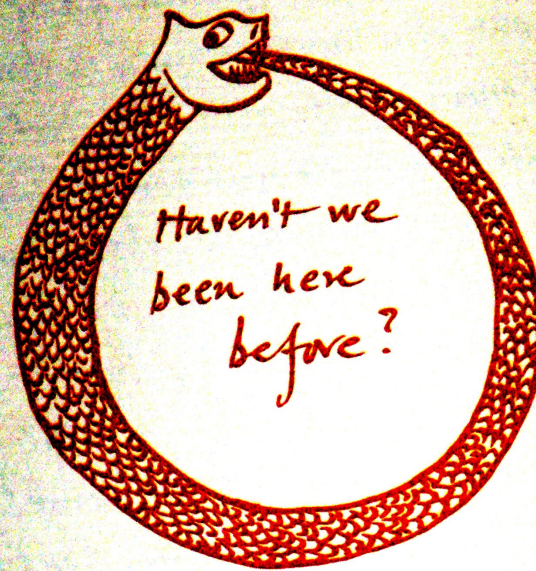
Nature, that is, our own true nature, is bringing these preoccupations to a stop by coming forth with the technical power to pursue them on a colossal scale, hitherto unknown. Pursued and magnified with such power, they come swiftly to absurdity and catastrophe — so that their innate contradictions become obvious to all. For we have been trying to harness technology to the impossible game of having positive without negative, defying the principles of that very electricity upon which technology so largely depends. This objective is as illusory as the ego which seeks it.

Thus a time when the objective seems clearly unattainable is a time ripe for the unmasking of that ego — itself the persona-mask which conceals the splendor of our Original Face. When spring comes the buds break out of their husks, the little birds cast off their shells, and young plants burst from their seed-casings. . . . Then there is a crack in the Cosmic Egg, Buddha is about to









Haven't we  
been here  
before?